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STATEMENT ON EAST TIMOR

TO THE

FOURTH COMMITTEE OF THE UNITED NATIONS

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Mr. Chairman, distinguished delegates:

In the course of this year's deliberations on East Timor many speakers will present themselves to you as the representatives of the East Timorese people. The claim they will advance and ask you to recognize is that they speak for the people of East Timor, that they articulate the needs, wants, and aspirations of the populace.

My purpose is of another nature. I am an anthropologist, and I do not claim to speak for the East Timorese. I cannot be their voice, even if I knew what they might want me to say to you today. When I offer opinions, they are my own opinions - shaped by my training as an anthropologist, by the two years I spent doing fieldwork in East Timor, and by years spent reflecting on the East Timorese people and their way of life.

When I reproduce the ideas of certain East Timorese, I do not claim these ideas as my own, nor do I ask you to adopt them, to take on an alien conception of reality. The issue is rather to ask ourselves if such conceptions register a claim on our attention, if the social wisdom of a remote people has a place in these proceedings. In setting before you the terms in which East Timorese conceived of and reflected on their political situation, I am endeavoring to elicit your attention for a foreign way of making sense out of the world which I feel urgently needs your respect.

And so, to the best of my abilities, I shall try to convey to you something of how the East Timorese perceived and pursued their own interests. But first I must describe the conditions of my experience with East Timor. From October 1972 through November 1974 I was engaged in ethnographic research on what was then the overseas province of Portuguese Timor. This research formed the basis for my doctoral dissertation, submitted to Harvard University in 1977. Most of my stay on Timor was spent with a people known as the Mambai. The Mambai who number (or once numbered) over 80,000 are the largest ethnic group on the eastern half of the island. They inhabit the rugged interior mountains and high valleys south of Dili where, at least until 1975, they eked out a subsistence based on shifting cultivation and animal husbandry. During the course of my fieldwork I became fluent in their language and conversant with their ways of life. I have travelled widely in East Timor, and I attained an adequate command of the Tetun language which served as a lingua franca throughout the province.

When I left Timor in late November of 1974 the issue of decolonization had been posed, the three political parties, FRETILIN, UDT and APODETI, had been formed, and concerned, serious political debate had spread across the province.

My overall impression at that time was that FRETILIN was well on its way to achieving wide popular support. Moreover, I think it likely that when the Portuguese withdrew from the province, FRETILIN prestige and popularity were greatly enhanced. All that I have heard concerning FRETILIN activities during the interim period leaves me impressed with the efficiency, restraint, intelligence and dedication of its leadership.

Nonetheless, on the basis of my own experiences I cannot endorse the claim to legitimacy of any one Timorese political party, for no clear consensus had emerged by the time of my departure. My purpose here is not to take a partisan position, but to present a specialist's assessment of two points: 1) the capacity of the East Timorese people to exercise self-determination; 2) the legitimacy of the Indonesian "integration" of East Timor.

With respect to the first point, I wish to reiterate the opinion I stated the last time I addressed the United Nations. If provided with the opportunity, the people of East Timor are fully capable of determining their own political future. This opinion is shared by Dr. Shepard Forman, an anthropologist whose research with the Makassae of East Timor overlapped in time with my own. Dr. Forman based his opinion on his studies of Makassae political history and activity. During his investigation he observed many acts of collective decision-making, including a local act of self-determination in which over 475 Makassae household heads participated in an election to determine the administrative status of four villages.

My own evaluation of East Timorese decision-making capacities is based on evidence of a somewhat different kind, and has as much to do with "religious" as with "political" life. Indeed, the Western distinction between religion and politics has no place in Mambai social thought. Mambai conceive of the political order of the realm as necessary to cosmic well-being, and this conceptual premise underlies their serious and thoughtful concern over the issue of decolonization. The possible departure of the Portuguese and termination of colonial rule had a profound significance for the Mambai, who regarded the Portuguese as legitimate sovereigns and who construed colonial rule as part of a cosmic order.

Mambai mythology locates the Portuguese within this cosmic order, identifying them as the younger brothers of the Timorese, born on the sacred mountain at the center of Timor. Father Heaven, the divine regulator of the cosmos, authorized the Portuguese brothers to rule over the human realm and bestowed on them the sacred flag and marching drum, the insignia of jural sovereignty. To the elder Timorese brothers Heaven entrusted the sacred rock and tree of

religious cult, charging them with the ritual custodianship of the cosmos. Mythology narrates that when the Portuguese abandoned their obligations and vanished overseas, one of their Timorese brothers pursued them and called them back to rule over Timor. Thus was colonial rule first established. In this mythological model Portuguese and Timorese perform opposed, interdependent jural and ritual functions, and a disturbance in one sphere necessarily disrupts the other. Thus if the jural order of society founders, human strife and discord are said to "jostle and shake" the ritually-maintained cosmos on which all life depends.

This mythological model mediated Mambai perceptions of the new political situation. Because they interpreted political change in terms of its consequences for cosmic order, they viewed the issue of decolonization as a matter of universal concern, and they had no intention of leaving the determination of the future to others. If, as they said over and over, their Portuguese brothers had grown old and weary, then a successor must be found. I want to emphasize that the Mambai were willing and prepared to play an active role in this succession process. Indeed, their cultural identity obliged them to seek such a role; regarding themselves as the elder masters of the cosmos, they could not and would not accept the legitimacy of any decision in which they did not participate. Throughout the last months of my fieldwork Mambai, both individually and collectively, called for a grand reunion in which the Portuguese and all the peoples of Timor would gather together to discuss the situation and arrive at a consensual solution. Although the Mambai felt that the proper place for such a reunion was in the sacred center of their own territory, they did not intend to wait there, passively anticipating a meeting which might never take place. While convinced of their own sacred authority, they knew that the folk of the coast (a category which included both the Portuguese and the leaders of the new parties) might no longer remember the true order of things. And so, when I left them, the Mambai were advancing to meet the forces of change. Slowly, awkwardly, a little truculently, but with a growing sense of resolve, they were committing themselves to active involvement in a process of self-determination.

This process was tragically interrupted by the Indonesian invasion launched on December 7, 1975. To evaluate the legitimacy of the Indonesian claim to sovereignty, we must first consider the claim in the context of colonial history. The colonially imposed division of the Lesser Sundas between two competing spheres of interest, Dutch and Portuguese, is a fundamental historical fact which should inform the demarcation of post-colonial boundaries. Briefly, my point is that the historical experience of Portuguese rule has differentiated eastern

Timor from the formerly Dutch-ruled territories now included in the Republic of Indonesia. The pervasive family resemblances between the cultures of the area are outweighed by the historically constructed differences resulting from divergent colonial experiences. Above all, what is implicit in my above remarks is that the cultural identities of the peoples of East Timor reflect their historical involvement with the Portuguese colonial presence; they are not culturally prepared for integration in the Republic of Indonesia. The Mambai, for example, had created a distinctive cultural identity by weaving the political fact of Portuguese colonial rule into their model of reality.

Moreover, the administrative unification of East Timor under colonial rule simultaneously lays the foundations for a national identity, and works against indigenous legitimation of Indonesian intervention. For while it is true that East Timorese once responded to the challenge of an alien civilization by integrating the foreigners into their world, this solution was created under conditions radically different from those which obtain today. Firstly, the character of the Portuguese occupation, which unfolded gradually and involved relatively little use of military force, contrasts sharply with the sudden and violent imposition of Indonesian rule. Secondly, the Portuguese initially confronted and dealt with isolated, individual local groups to whom an alliance with the Portuguese often seemed economically and politically advantageous. The Indonesians, in contrast, confront a population bound by a common past, a past which includes the recent, aborted experience of self-determination. Here we come to the third and critical factor which differentiates Indonesian from Portuguese intervention: the presence of FRETILIN, a well-organized, dedicated, energetic national independence movement actively involved in cultivating a new national consciousness and in mobilizing a national resistance.

The post-invasion political situation is one in which the Indonesians and their sympathizers are set against the forces of resistance coalescing around FRETILIN. The East Timorese population is inevitably caught between two antagonistic sides and, whatever their allegiances, their structural position makes them into an object of suspicion and mistrust. If even partially accurate, the reports of Indonesian atrocities against the civilian population indicate an hysterical hostility, sustained, no doubt, by a sense of political insecurity. As for FRETILIN, the movement must become, to some degree, the victim of a politically polarized climate; this is a situation of "whoever is not with you is against you." One can hope for the physical survival of the East Timorese people; and one can hope that the international community will continue the flow

of humanitarian aid to a population decimated by war, starvation and disease. East Timorese cultural survival is another matter, perhaps less easily resolved, and I fear that it too is gravely threatened by the continuing hostilities.

It is my own opinion that the only party able to mediate in the crisis is the Portuguese government, supported by the United Nations. I believe that a peaceful resolution necessitates the withdrawal of the Indonesian forces and the return of the Portuguese administration to resume a peaceful process of decolonization. It should be noted that throughout the interim period of the FRETILIN caretaker administration, the FRETILIN leaders called urgently and repeatedly for the Portuguese to return, and only resorted to a declaration of independence in the wake of Portuguese silence and Indonesian armed intervention.

In 1974 the Mambai were adamant in espousing a Portuguese-supervised decolonization process, but I do not know if the Mambai would agree with me today. For the Portuguese abandoned Timor and, in so doing, it is possible that they sacrificed their old legitimacy. Nevertheless, the Mambai were not strangers to abandonment or broken trust, and they were used to keeping their half of contracts ignored by the other party.

In concluding, I want to address an appeal to the Portuguese government in particular and to the international community in general. The appeal is my own, but I have grounded it in certain premises of Mambai thought and expressed it in the terms and idioms of Mambai social discourse.

It may be that there is embedded in every culture a characteristic, diffuse anxiety, a deep and persistent form of uneasiness which composes the underside of a culture's sense of order. In modern Western thought, it seems to me, such an anxiety emerges as an ironic intuition that order may be no more than an artifice, that there may be no meaning to social life beyond that which some one segment of humanity constructs, and no external reality to which these socially constructed meanings refer.

Mambai anxiety is of another type, for they conceive of order as immanent, in a world structured according to a cosmic plan. What worries them is not the intrinsic orderliness of the social world, but rather the constant threat to order posed by human forgetfulness. Forgetfulness and negligence are conditions associated with movement away from the origin place, with journeying away from the source. Thus the wanderer who abandons his homeland is prone to neglect his obligations, to forget the ties to his source which bind him regardless of his movements. Here we touch upon a fundamental premise of Mambai thought: the obligations between the one who leaves and the one who stays are reciprocal and

indissoluble; the ties which bind them are immutable ties. Mambai identify themselves collectively as the ones who neither wander nor forget and any anxiety expressed in their discourse is about absence, abandonment, forgetfulness, and memory. The Mambai, who remain behind at the origin place, hold the order of the world together in their thought.

Mambai mythology provides us with a vivid image of these figures. When the young Portuguese brother abandons his homeland and vanishes overseas, he forgets his obligations to those left behind. His elder brother is forced to pursue him and remind him of his duties. These mythological images of forgetting and reminding structured Mambai perceptions of historical events. For instance, when the Portuguese abolished the traditional tribute and instituted a cash head-tax, the Mambai construed this action as a new and distressing index of Portuguese forgetfulness. Nevertheless, they continued to affirm the legitimacy of colonial rule, invoking the mythological model of obligations forgotten and later recalled to mind.

In 1974 what troubled Mambai was not the prospect of decolonization, but rather the possibility that the Portuguese might forget their final obligations and steal away before the shape of the future had been determined. They voiced this fear to me on many occasions, fretfully, indignantly, even compassionately - for they understood that the Portuguese had many troubles in their own land overseas. "But if they are in difficulty," one friend complained, "why do they not come to us, their elder brothers?" I had no answer for him.

One could say that the Mambai were victims of "false consciousness", that they were deceived by a symbolic distortion of reality which long served the interests of the dominant colonial power. It is my opinion, however, that the Mambai have creatively appropriated such senseless events as foreign conquest and rule, and used them to construct a culturally satisfying, coherent, and livable reality. History may make victims of them Mambai in the end, it may shatter the structures of thought which not only legitimized colonial rule, but sustained the Mambai conviction that the world makes sense, even when human conduct is senseless. History may prove the Mambai conviction wrong. Their symbolic order was a wager, after all, and wagers can be lost.

At all events, the outcome has passed beyond Mambai control now, for they cannot pursue us overseas to stir our memories, and I cannot ask you to protect their wager by assuming their worldview. So it is up to us to recreate out of our own experiences a new sense of obligation to the people of East Timor, and to express it by re-affirming their right to determine their own future. We must pledge them our continuing moral, political and material support.